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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DOHA 000317

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STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP, S/CT
BAGHDAD FOR ERIK RYE
NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [1Z](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: U/S HUGHES MEETINGS AT AL JAZEERA

REF: A. DOHA 104

[B](#). DOHA 219

[C](#). DOHA 312

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Mirembe Nantongo, Reasons 1.4(b&d
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: U/S for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
Karen Hughes met February 19 with Al Jazeera managing
director Wadah Khanfar at the Al Jazeera studios in Doha. She
also participated in a roundtable discussion with Khanfar and
four senior Al Jazeera staff members and recorded an Al
Jazeera interview. End summary.

Meeting with Wadah Khanfar

[1](#)2. (C) U/S Hughes, accompanied by Ambassador Chase
Untermeyer, NEA/PPD Director Alberto Fernandez and PAO met
Feb 19 with Al Jazeera Managing Director Wadah Khanfar. U/S
Hughes began the meeting by noting that, as a communicator,
she felt obligated to engage Al Jazeera, despite the
existence of voices in Washington opposing such engagement.
She noted that the USG has observed some improvement in the
quality of Al Jazeera's programming over the course of the
last year, but emphasized that serious work still remains to
be done, particularly as regards coverage of Iraq. The US is
in a situation in Iraq "where our sons and daughters are
getting killed," and the USG remains very concerned about the
creation of any environment or atmosphere that condones
violence against Americans, said Hughes. She spoke of the
necessity of confronting the "atmosphere of hate" and the
need for respectful, neutral voices in the media.

[1](#)3. (C) Khanfar said he welcomed her observations. "We see
ourselves as your partners in this, not as something to
create problems. We are interested in stability in Iraq. It
is clear that incitement has led nowhere." He said that
focus on reform has been one of Al Jazeera's pillars since
its establishment in 1996. AJ has adopted clear standards in
its codes of conduct and ethics and is continuing its
learning curve. "We make mistakes, we correct them," he said.
Referring to the monthly report from the USG he receives via
the Embassy (Note: DIA's unclassified snippets. End note), he
complained, "Clearly the person who writes this report is not
a journalist. The report is politically oriented."

[1](#)4. (C) Returning to the subject of regional reform, he
repeated: "We see ourselves as partners." All AJ's
journalists come from a background that forced them to act
against their professional standards in support of government
propaganda. AJ has provided a different atmosphere in which
these journalists can work: "We have a mission and we try to
achieve our mission through professionalism." He spoke of
AJ's new international bent, referring to the Al Jazeera
forum held in Doha in February, as well as the early February
visit of Al Jazeera's new International Board of Visitors
(Ref A). This was the first time AJ had opened up its
editorial policy to international scrutiny, he said. The
Board of Visitors participated in two days of "intense"
discussions with AJ editorial staff and the sessions resulted
in some "great ideas," said Khanfar.

AJ and terrorist-provided tapes

[1](#)5. (C) U/S Hughes noted that a key USG concern is Al
Jazeera's airing of terrorist-provided video tapes, whether
of Al Qaeda origin, or relating to kidnappings in Iraq. She
asked Khanfar why AJ is the channel of choice for such tapes.
Khanfar replied that AJ is the channel of choice for anyone
who wants to reach the Arab world, whether it is Osama bin
Laden, the Imam of Cairo's Al Azhar, or officials in the Arab
world. "If you want to speak to the Arab-Muslim world you
come to Al Jazeera. Everyone does."

[1](#)6. (C) Khanfar reviewed AJ's policies on kidnapping tapes
(showing a few seconds; avoiding scenes humiliating to the
hostages; muting all sound from the tapes; using anchor

voice-over to communicate details of the kidnapping or of kidnappers' demands) and on Al Qaeda tapes. "We have come a long way on these," he said, noting that in the beginning AJ would air Al Qaeda tapes almost in their entirety. Now, he said, the channel selects only sections that are newsworthy and does not air long passages of religious or other rhetoric. Some tapes received by AJ are not judged newsworthy at all, he said. "We do not air all the tapes we receive," he said.

17. (C) U/S Hughes pointed out that by airing the tapes at all, AJ is providing an enormous platform for "people who want to kill, not just Americans, but Christians and Jews everywhere." Khanfar acknowledged that the longest and most heated debates taking place among AJ editorial staff concern the hows and whys of broadcasting Al Qaeda tapes. In the end, however, he insisted, AJ has performed a service to the world at large, in that it has helped mature understanding of Al Qaeda's position. The channel airs only selected portions of the tapes, and then invites commentators to discuss the content and thus "Al Jazeera deconstructs the discourse of Osama bin Laden. We bring analysis to it, putting rationality in something that is not supposed to be rational," said Khanfar and the audience reaches an inevitable conclusion, which is: "Osama bin Laden's discourse is not useful, it is not practical. Osama bin Laden's image today is not what it was" before Al Jazeera began airing and analyzing the tapes, he said.

18. (C) U/S Hughes took the opportunity to remind Khanfar of his Feb 11 discussion with Emboffs concerning the possibility of Al Jazeera passing copies of kidnapping tapes to embassies of the kidnap victims' countries (Ref B). Khanfar reiterated to U/S Hughes AJ's reluctance to do so because of the likelihood that such transactions would involve AJ in legal proceedings. When reminded of his Ref B undertaking to take the matter to the Al Jazeera Board of Directors for discussion of a possible policy change, Khanfar noted that the Board has only just been formed, referring to the recently announced board of the Al Jazeera Network (Ref C). (Note: We will continue to follow up on this issue. End note.)

USG spokespeople in Dubai's Media City

19. (C) U/S Hughes observed that the USG has "to do a better job" of speaking out and staking out its position in the region, and described for Khanfar a plan to place two or three USG spokespeople on a permanent basis in Dubai's Media City, who would be available for comment at any time on a complete range of issues. She asked Khanfar what sort of expertise should appropriately be placed in Dubai and he responded that expertise on USG policy in Iraq, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on detainees and on economics would be areas of key focus. He said AJ would appreciate having USG spokespeople "on tap", as it was often problematic to get timely USG comments on different issues.

The cartoon controversy

110. (C) Khanfar told U/S Hughes that in his view the whole cartoon controversy is "playing into the hands of Osama bin Laden." He said the Doha-based Al Jazeera Center for Studies is convening a conference on March 9 which will host philosophers and thinkers from the Muslim world and from the West, to discuss and formulate a framework of understanding, that will take into account the cultural and religious diversity at play and the different "cognitive maps" the players bring to the issue. Khanfar said he thought the US stance on the cartoon controversy was "very positive. You understand issues of diversity more than the others do." Following up on this point, he told U/S Hughes that when Al Jazeera was designing its newsroom in the new studios, it sought design proposals from Canadian, German, French and US firms. He said the firms were asked to consider an Arab perspective, including the colors and concept of the desert, in their designs. None of the designers "got it" except the American firm, and it is the US design that was implemented, he said.

Roundtable with Al Jazeera senior staff

111. (U) Following her meeting with Khanfar, U/S Hughes moved into a roundtable discussion attended by Khanfar, Chief Editor Ahmed Sheikh, Deputy Chief Editor Ayman Gaballa and senior AJ presenters Mohamed Krishan and Jamil Azar. Ambassador Untermyer, R staff and Emboffs were also present.

112. (SBU) U/S Hughes made the same points to the group as she had made earlier to Khanfar, emphasizing her view of the importance of ensuring that people have the freedom to hear a wide range of views and her conviction that if people are given a choice they will choose freedom over tyranny, tolerance over intolerance, and the rule of law over despotic

regimes. She noted improvements in Al Jazeera programming, but emphasized that the USG still retains serious concerns over the professionalism of some of the channel's content, particularly as it relates to Iraq coverage and to the airing of terrorist-provided videotapes. "It is incumbent on all of us to confront the culture of hate, and try to have a more civil and respectful dialogue," she said.

13. (SBU) The two sides of the table then spent the next hour debating various issues relating to problematic Al Jazeera coverage. The AJ team denounced the "urban myth" that the channel has ever shown a beheading, noting that very early on after the start of the era of "kidnapping" videos, they showed a clip right up to the moment of the beheading, but not the actual beheading itself, and they had never even come close since then. Jamil Azar, who identified himself as the channel's Chief Language Monitor, described the station's policy on the use of idioms and provocative vocabulary. Ahmed Sheikh complained that some of the complaints from the USG side concerning AJ coverage are based on faulty translations from Arabic into English; he also complained about CENTCOM's slowness to respond to requests for comment on Iraq operations. NEA/PPD Director Fernandez made the point that in December during the Iraqi elections, Saddam Hussein's former ambassador to the UN was interviewed as a commentator, and the station failed to identify him accurately, misleadingly labeling him as simply "a political analyst." Khanfar said editorial policy now forbids the use of the term "political analyst". (Note: The US team noted the use of the term during a news program that same night on Al Jazeera. End note.) The US team criticized the caliber of some of the people brought on to AJ talk shows and also asked for a copy of the station's formal editorial policy. Khanfar said that following the AJ Board of Visitors' meeting in early February the policy was undergoing translation, and that he would pass on a copy once the translation is complete. The AJ team asked for news of Sami Al Hajj, the Sudanese Al Jazeera cameraman arrested on the Pakistan-Afghan border in 2001 and now detained in Guantanamo; and they also complained once again that the USG had bombed their offices in Baghdad and Kabul without offering a word of apology or regret.

14. (SBU) Although the roundtable discussion did not resolve any key issues, the atmosphere was cordial and all parties had a lot to say. The discussion ended due to time constraints. Following the roundtable, U/S Hughes proceeded to the Al Jazeera studios to tape an interview segment for the station's "Interview of the Day" program. During the interview, U/S Hughes was questioned on US policy towards Hamas, on her work to improve the US image abroad, and on USG policy towards detainees.

15. (U) The Hughes delegation did not have an opportunity to review this cable.
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